

Sketch

Volume 45, Number 3

1980

Article 7

All In The Line Of Duty

Richard W. Blomberg*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1980 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

All In The Line Of Duty

Richard W. Blomberg

Abstract

Four gunner's mates, including Smitty, weaved down the new destroyer's cold, rocking passageway; Doc followed close behind. Ocean must be calm today, Doc thought; the sometimes tumbling passageway rocked gently back and forth...

ALL IN THE LINE OF DUTY

by

Richard W. Blomberg

Distr. Studies Senior

Four gunner's mates, including Smitty, weaved down the new destroyer's cold, rocking passageway; Doc followed close behind. *Ocean must be calm today*, Doc thought; the sometimes tumbling passageway rocked gently back and forth. When they reached the ladder which descended to the ship's storage refrigerators, Doc went first, since he had the key. As he threw the refrigerator door open, cold fear swirled at him from within the tomb. The stretcher containing a green body-bag lay right where they had left it three days earlier after the accident. Mist concealed the stretcher where it lay on the cold, splintered pallets. Sight of the body-bag resurrected memories in Doc of the mutilated form lying sprawled in a coagulating pool of blood. Smitty entered the walk-in space with another gunner, and they jarred their fallen companion from his resting place to send him on his final trip home. The four pallbearers lifted the cold aluminum stretcher and wrestled it back up the narrow ladder.

Doc shuffled along behind the creeping procession as it weaved its way along the swaying passageways and through the water-tight hatches to the after end of the ship and out onto the fantail. The fog, which engulfed the ship, glowed in the early morning light. A small wake tumbled behind the ship as it crept along, heading into the wind so that the helicopter could land. The procession surmounted two flights of stairs to the flight deck and carried the stretcher across the painted non-skid surface to the vacant hangar. After they laid the body down, the group split up, dragging cigarettes from their dress-blue uniforms and staring aimlessly out to sea.

As Smitty and Doc leaned over the rail, watching water and foam slide by, the warm sun greeted them through the coastal fog. Smitty and Doc had been friends since the time Doc shot Smitty full of penicillin to cure his VD and then kept him out of trouble by not reporting it. Smitty had been aboard five different ships, so he considered it wise for the inex-

perienced Doc to take his weathered advice. His conversations began like all sea stories, "Now, this is no shit, but . . .," and then he overpowered Doc with one of his stories of booming cannons or liberty call in Subic Bay. A sand crab like Doc who had not even been across the equator still had a lot to learn about the real Navy.

Smitty's salty face glowed in the sun and his emotions churned in the fog as he tried to reason why. Doc, smooth and fuzzy, inhaled deeply on his cigarette; he thought only of the dripping blood. It was hard for them to anticipate their return to home port later that morning—when the green body-bag and its hidden, mutilated corpse kept reminding them of that horrible day.

The ship had been at general quarters, practicing shooting the biggest guns on board. Doc's battle station had been Sick Bay, so he did not have to go anywhere during the drill, but he did have to wear headphones which connected him with Damage Control Central. Since general quarters often lasted several hours, Doc sat at his desk catching up on monthly reports and writing letters while he listened to different people communicating over the headset.

BOOM

The deep thunder of the five-inch cannon vibrated through the steel-insulated vessel, blasting the disinfected silence of Sick Bay. Doc's pen slipped across the letter he was writing when the ship bucked from the ominous gun. Ten seconds later. . .

BOOM

Sick Bay did not recoil as much from the distant forward gun as it fired at imaginary targets, but the same dull sound slammed through the ship.

Doc cursed the guns as they alternately fired and reloaded, shattering his sterile silence. He was not really a doctor, but it was his Sick Bay just the same. The Navy had trained him as a hospital corpsman and stationed him at a hospital for four years before his orders came through for destroyer duty. He had been seeking the unique responsibility of being the only representative of medical personnel aboard a

ship carrying three hundred men, but he had worried about how he would perform in a crisis.

In the hospital there had always been doctors and nurses to ask for help; on the ship, the only help he had was his books. He knew the time was coming, it always does, when his books would be useless and he would have to rely on his peripheral knowledge of medicine in a life-or-death situation. *Don't think of it*, he thought. *You only had one person die in the four years at the hospital. Maybe you're lucky.* He looked at the daily treatment record; it bulged with runny noses and upset stomachs. It had all been cookbook medicine so far.

BOOM

The steel deck vibrated, but the sound—the sound was different; it was hollow. The headphones went silent, and the ship rolled in the swells as the vessel steamed forward, anxious to get home but bothered by the sudden pain in its belly.

The forward gun did not answer, and silence spread through the ship. The only sound Doc heard was that of the turbines whining to turn the screws.

Suddenly the silence was broken as the lever to the water-tight hatch outside Sick Bay clanged open and the Chief Gunner's Mate from the forward gun mount scrambled through the door. His terrified eyes did not see Doc standing in the doorway as the Chief grabbed the hand rails to the ladder and slid down to the next deck below. Doc watched the Chief's head glide out of sight. His limbs quivered from a nervous bolt of energy.

God, I hope nothing's wrong. Didn't like the look in the Chief's eye, Doc thought. His knees were shaking, and his cold, sweating hands were writhing in his pockets when the silence over the phones was broken.

"Doc? Doc? Are you there?"

His head tingled, squeezed between the earphones, as blood swelled to his throat, almost choking off his reply.

"Doc, you'd better get down to the rear gun mount on the double. There's been trouble."

The cold words slithered down his spine and lit the fuse which detonated a huge reserve of nervous energy into reeling action. *Oh, Jesus. What am I gonna do now?* He flung the

headset on the desk, grabbed the first aid unit which hung on the door, and raced from Sick Bay. As he slid down the rail to the next deck, behind the Chief, his racing heart pounded in his ears. Although he knew his way around the ship, someone met him to lead him quickly through the labyrinth of hatches which led to the gun. The way was lined with members of a damage control party, and as Doc raced by, their pleas echoed in his electrified brain.

"It's bad, Doc."

"God, it's bad."

Their worried faces followed Doc down the passageway and curiosity urged them to follow and see what happened.

When Doc climbed through the hatch to the gun mount, a blood-covered gunner's mate stood beneath the gun mount, screaming for Doc to hurry. Doc was jolted when he saw the blood dripping from the black gun mount and forming pools in the greasy deck plates.

My god. What happened? What'll I do? He stared at the blood. The odor of burnt gunpowder and fresh blood gagged him. He panted through his mouth.

The shaking hand of one of the gunner's mates grabbed Doc's arm while his other hand pointed at a bleeding body on a dark, narrow ledge up in the gun mount. It lay still, lifeless and bleeding.

"You gotta get him outa there, Doc," he said; his scared, white eyes danced wildly.

Time, that's what the books say is important, Doc thought. He looked quickly around the mount; Smitty stood behind one of the gun's control panels shuffling back and forth with hands in his pockets. "Get that first aid box opened up, Smitty," Doc yelled as he turned back towards the gun.

Gotta get him down, Doc thought; and his only solution was to go up after him himself. As he stepped beneath the gun, blood began dripping on him. The warm drops splattered red upon his arms. *Have to hurry up and get that bleeding stopped. The book says I got five minutes.* As he looked up, picking the best route of ascent, another drop splashed in his eye. His own blood throbbed in his head as he jumped up onto the base of the gun and scrambled upward into the sinister death trap.

Doc clung to a steel bar with one hand while his other trembling hand probed the body for signs of life. It lay limp on a small, steel ledge; its arm hung heavy as Doc felt for a pulse. *Must be unconscious*, Doc thought. *Sure isn't moving.*

There was nothing Doc could do to stop the bleeding up in the dark gun housing, and he knew he could not lift the body; so for the sake of speed he rolled it off the ledge, and it fell heavily into the arms of the sailors below.

As Doc jumped down out of the gun, the Captain and a horrified gallery of crew members stood staring at the mutilated body. Doc was anxious to get started on resuscitating the patient, since he knew he only had four or five minutes before irreparable brain damage was incurred. He inserted a plastic airway between the blue, gaping lips of the body and connected an air breathing bag to it. "Smitty, pump this bag once every five times I pump his chest."

Smitty just stood, staring at the body.

"Smitty, goddammit. Get down here."

Doc's urgency snapped Smitty back to reality, and he squatted down beside Doc and grabbed the bag.

Doc forgot about trying to stop the bleeding, since it seemed to be coming from everywhere and he began pumping the patient's chest. When he depressed the chest to pump the heart, he felt the crushed bone collapse.

The book never seemed to be confused about what to do, Doc thought. *It was always cut-and-dried: one, two, three, four.* Now Doc was on his own. "Pump, Smitty, pump."

When Smitty pumped the air bag, the air did not go to the lungs, but it bubbled through a deep gash in the throat, blowing the jagged edges of skin apart as it escaped.

"Dammit, Smitty. You gotta extend his neck so the air gets down into his lungs." Doc grabbed the patient's jaw and the back of his head to help Smitty. His hand slipped into a hole in the back of the body's skull. Doc jerked his hand back and looked at the hole where a chunk of the patient's brain had been. He felt faint and queasy.

"My god. He's dead," Doc said. The body lay still; the uniform, ripped and punctured, was now soaked in blood. Doc swallowed hard, but his mouth still hung open drily as he covered the corpse with a green blanket.

The Captain and crew stood watching, waiting for the corpse to jump up and claim that it was all a joke, but the blanket never moved.

Smitty stared at the green form; his salty, weathered face seemed pale and weakened. He stumbled back to his control panel and sat with his head buried in his leathery palms.

Doc and the Captain spoke briefly about what was to be done and then Doc selected two volunteers to help him transport the body to Sick Bay and get it cleaned up. As they cut away the tattered uniform, gaping wounds appeared everywhere. As Doc was washing the hands of the corpse, he saw the needle mark in its fingernail where he had tried to poke a hole through it to relieve the pressure of a blood blister a couple of days earlier. The patient had almost fainted from the pain, and Doc had had to stop. The blood blister was still there. Doc felt queer, comparing the pain of the small needle and that of the body's violent death.

They patched up all of the wounds, wrapped the body in three sheets, tagged it and zipped it into a green, vinyl body-bag. Then they transported it through the ship to the refrigerator, where they could store it until they got close enough to land for a helicopter to come out and get it.

Later, Doc went back down to the gun mount to check on Smitty. All of the gunners were scrubbing the deck and gun mount for traces of blood. Smitty seemed dulled by the grotesque events; his normally dominating man-of-the-sea personality was muted by the deathly silence which clung to the cold, hard steel of the gun. He turned towards Doc when he entered the gun mount, seeming relieved with the distraction.

"I got him all taken care of, Smitty. Have to keep the body in one of the coolers for three days though, until we're closer to home. You ok?"

Smitty just hung his head and nodded softly. "He should have known better. Eighteen years in the Navy, he should have known better."

"What really happened, Smitty?"

"We were going through routine firing procedure when one of the empty shell casings got jammed in the ejector

mechanisms of the gun after the round had been fired. He should have known to shut off the gun. He climbed up into the gun and pushed out the empty casing with a screwdriver; and when the shell flew out, the gun recoiled, crushing his body up in there." He motioned at the gun housing. "I've been out to sea for seven years and I've never seen anything as terrible as that. I don't know how you ever got me to run that breathing bag, but you did a good job."

"Attention, flight crew," the ship's intercom barked. "Helicopter will be arriving momentarily. Man your stations."

Smitty and Doc backed away from the ship's rail when they heard the faint beating of the helicopter as it approached the fog-shrouded ship. Smitty returned to take his place at one of the four corners of the stretcher, while Doc stood off to one side of the flight deck. The chopping of the helicopter approached the after end of the ship, hovering heavily over the dispersing fog. It landed just long enough for the stretcher to be placed on board and then it lifted off, taking the body on that final, lonesome journey home. The sun broke through the fog, and the men watched the helicopter shrink to a dark spot in the lightening sky.